

# CORBIN *by Christopher Davis*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the way Corbin's 'tao' is played against the neurotic personality of the narrator in this story that somehow feels like it belongs in The New Yorker. 'Stocking energy drinks at 3am feels a little too ironic to me, like dangling a sandwich just out of reach in front of a homeless man.' The mood is akin to urban despair and the characters, skillfully modeled through gesture, inference, description and action take the underlying nihilism in their lives for granted... The worst part is I do it to myself. No one's making me feel this way except my lousy brain. And I don't know how to make sense out of it. Why am I so—I can't even come up with the right word. Irregular? Abnormal? Inhuman? So it is all the more wonderful to watch how Corbin's actions and behavior impact on those around him, offering, if not the realization, at least the possibility of change. The jaundiced first person passive voice and observant prose only add to our pleasure. Charles told us: 'It's the kind of story I could read forever.' Five stars.*

## Corbin

I'm not drunk, but I feel like I should be. The purple hue of the bowling alley's "disco night" lights combining with the endless flashing screens and glowing neon bowling balls is enough to make my head spin. The acrid smell of liquid cheese and microwaved pepperoni, which surely comes out as greasily as it goes in, seeps into my lungs like a pungent fart that someone let slip in their hurry for more mozzarella sticks. Roughly the size of an adolescent rhinoceros, the man in lane six shimmies his large belly in celebration at having successfully rolled his unnecessarily-heavy ball into the pins at the end of the lane, knocking them all down simultaneously. The bottom of his gut peeks out from under his beer and sweat-stained Hawaiian shirt, which has surrendered its lowest button at some point in its sad life, splayed open to reveal

his horizontally-oval belly button, surely packed to the brim with lint and the crumbs of days gone by. He and his female companion, similar in shape and size, high five and toss back large swigs of beer like a pair of dwarves from Tolkein's Middle Earth, but with more grunting. I cradle my head in my hands, wondering how I got into this miserable situation, thinking maybe that's why heavy drinking is so often associated with bowling, to make it more bearable – it's surely an unspoken obligation of the so-called sport.

David, the general manager of the *7-11* where I currently work, threw together this horrifying little group date, and invited me along out of either obligation, guilt, pity, or some combination of all three. Whichever it was, he clearly regrets it now. I keep having these awkward moments of close contact with him, like going to bowl at the same time. He tries to say something to me to make me feel included, but it's always some pleasantry-chitchat kind of thing, typically requiring a "yes" or "no" answer, which doesn't exactly encourage further communication. Everyone else just looks past me like I'm not even there – a common response from normal people to quiet people – except for Debbie, the person I want the least attention from.

"How the hell did I get here?" I ask into my palms.

"What's that?" Debbie asks, her alcohol-tinged breath wafting over me. She moves her makeup-caked cheeks closer to my face from her vomit-orange plastic seat. Apparently, this is an invitation to repeat myself, but all it does is give me a blast of hair product chemicals that burn my eyes.

I sit up and shout over the music into Debbie's ear. "I said I really like the music here." I add a wide smile to seal the effect.

“I know! It’s like all of my favorite songs one after another!” she says, beaming at me and turning back to watch some guy named Brad moonwalking up to the ball return machine. I’ve managed to feign interest one more time, but just barely. In truth, the nonstop beat of so many blended pop, rap, rock, and dance songs is stomping my head into a migraine. I honestly don’t know why she’s “chosen” me in the first place – there are other, *louder*, guys at this thing, after all.

It’s not that I’m against dating in general, I just don’t know if I see the point. I’m not really “the sociable type” – or so I’ve been told my whole life. I never know what to say or how to act or how I feel about anything. I get so stuck in my head about things I start to feel like I’m not even human. Like with sexual attraction. That little primal drive just sucks the life out of me when I think about it. I’m attracted to girls on occasion, and feel the urge to talk to them, but then I start really scrutinizing her – whoever it is – and it’s like when you see a picture of your favorite food and it looks delicious, but then when you get up *real* close, each individual ingredient starts looking strange and insipid. I suddenly remember that the curves of her body that quicken my heart rate are just large swaths of skin stretched over bones, or that the softness of her contours that bounce as she moves are just deposits of fat or muscle tissue. Add the combination of having to say the right thing at the right time to an attention-seeking personality and I’m just over it.

I snap myself back out of my head – where I’m sure I’ve been for far too long, just now – to see Debbie dancing with Brad. Her drastically over-curled hair bounces above the sequined dress that emphasizes the curvy paunch of her middle she thinks the dress hides. I have to keep reminding myself that she’s my ‘date.’ It wasn’t officially-stated or anything, but it’s obvious she talked to Kyle and Nicole – apparently, the group’s resident matchmakers – about it. She’s been

buzzing around me nonstop since I got here, unless of course, anyone else does something loud and obnoxious, in which case she has no problem leaving my side to be just as loud and obnoxious for a few minutes.

Shrieks and squeals alert the entire alley to the fact that Brad has again knocked the pins down in one way or another – I miss it, having been watching the lane six couple ingesting ketchup-splattered hot dogs with their arms entwined like a bride and groom performing a wedding toast. It would almost be romantic if it weren't so repulsive. Debbie bounces back over from cheering and plops onto my lap. I can see the sweat under her arm pit as she swings her arm around me. Her warmth radiates through her dense legs onto my lap, adding to the heat and humidity the alley is already producing in excess. I can smell the pungent combination of shoe-disinfectant-slash-deodorizer from the dank shoes on her feet that someone just took off half an hour before – what a romantic atmosphere. Needing a break, I heave Debbie off my lap and tell her, as politely as possible, I'm going to order us some food.

I order nachos from the ironically-named “Fred's Snack Bistro” across the alley from our lane and sit on a metallic, red-cushioned swivel stool next to the soda fountain, waiting for the *ding* from the microwave to announce the completion of the cheese-melting over the soggy chips. As the couple in lane six race to see who can eat their loaded plates of chicken wings first, I notice a ragged-looking man lumber in through the front entrance. He looks incongruous, split right in half at the waist: the upper-body of a linebacker – broad shoulders, thick neck and arms – attached to the lower-body of a scrawny teenager – small waist and thin legs. His blue sweatshirt hood is up, but his bristled, brown hair holds it up at odd angles, and the bottle in his hand swings when he walks like he was slinging a Yoyo. Outside alcohol isn't allowed in the alley, but the way he walked – that lazy stride that seems to keep him invisible and below the radar

while simultaneously calling everyone's attention to him – told me he'd get away with it. He *was* a bowling ball, himself, gliding down the vibrant, zigzag-patterned carpet, seeming to gather speed as he goes, and you knew whatever he collided with would make a considerable crash. Apparently, I was his pins, because he plunked down on the stool next to me.

“Gimme a beer, Rick,” he said to the lanes at large, resting his elbows on the counter behind him. Unsure who he addressed, I look for the bartender, but don't see him anywhere. I turn back to him, unsure what to say. I can't help but stare at him. His sunglasses hide his eyes, but I can feel him taking me in from his periphery.

“That girl in the yellow...” he said, still not facing me. I scan the lanes. Craning my neck, I see a tall, beautiful woman in a yellow sweater bowling with a man at the far end of the alley. The man was showing her how to curve the ball, his hand on hers, their hips touching. It looks very hot – temperature-wise, I mean. I assume that's who he meant, anyway, but can't figure out how he'd even spotted her with his face aimed at the center of the alley.

“What about her?” I ask.

“She's asking for it,” is all he says. It feels very business-oriented, like staff meetings I'd been to at previous jobs – he let the connotations do the work.

“She's with someone,” I state.

“That doesn't concern me.” The directness of his replies unnerves me. He finally turns toward me, fixing his eyes on mine. They were outlined with small creases, not from age, I think, but from a lifetime of squinting – they look familiar, but I can't place them.

“See, sex isn’t this big, complicated thing we make it out to be,” he says. “We all want it. We all *need* it. But we created these damned rules around it. Now, ask yourself: who *made* these rules? Where do they exist, exactly? You ever *seen* them written somewhere? I got everything to gain and nothing to lose from going over there. Why shouldn’t I go over there and talk to that beauty? Because *you’ll* tell me I’m an ‘asshole?’ Why should *you* get to judge me, Jeff?” He turns his eyes back to the girl in yellow. I stare at him, perplexed.

His logic is simple, yet somewhat impressive. It isn’t based on anything but his own personal values. He couldn’t be wrong on *his* terms. Who *could* judge him if he didn’t care what other people thought of him? I appreciate it, but I guess I don’t have the same conviction to get behind what he said. I’m not *against* sex, necessarily, but it just feels so complicated and unnecessary. First off, no one teaches you how to talk to women. It’s either you’re good at it or you’re not. There isn’t even a learning curve – it’s pass/fail. I *am* interested in sex, just for the record, but it’s not even for my own physical gratification. Rather, I see sex as this weird way of *learning* someone. Sensual pleasures aside, when you make someone orgasm, you’re generally seeing a part of that person very few other people ever get to see. Their physical responses – whether or not they vocalize, if their muscles spasm, if their eyes remain open or roll up into their heads or shut tight – it’s all unique to each individual. It’s peeling the layers of the onion back to the center bulb. I’m wondering what sex between the “lane sixer’s” must be like, when I realize.

“Wait – how do you know my name?” I ask, but he just stands up and takes a swig from his bottle.

“Sorry Jeff, I gotta go be ‘an asshole,’” he says, and walks off toward the girl and her date, just as the bartender shows up with a beer and my nachos. I wonder how the bartender had

known to bring out the beer, not having been present when he'd asked for it, but I'm more occupied with the fact that the guy knew my name. Was he an old co-worker? A friend-of-a-friend? I wrack my brains, but can't remember him from anywhere. Maybe he was stalking me? If he was, though, why did he just leave instead of murdering me on the spot? I'm spiraling again.

"Where'd Corbin go?" the bartender asks, setting down the bottle and plate. When he says his name, something clicks into place.

"Wait, is that Corbin Hatchett?" I ask the bartender. "From Crittenden Middle School?"

"How the hell should I know?" the bartender replies. Clearly a stupid question to ask the bartender, but I knew it was him. A tangle of odd memories from some previous lifetime materializes in my mind. I never knew him well, yet I know many strange things about him. Or rather, I have many strange *speculations* about him. I remember his house, two streets over from mine. My parents called it the "junk house," because a random assortment of debris consistently occupied the yard, surrounded by a waist-high chain-link fence. I used to pass it on my bike occasionally, always a little wary. While the peak of my childhood "wildness" equated to things like throwing oranges at cars on the freeway or launching rocks over my backyard fence with a slingshot, you could find Corbin on any day of the week wandering his yard with lead pipes, rusty saws, or even nail guns. His parents never seemed to be around, either. As a kid, I spent many days wondering what went on in that house, the same way I wonder now where he'd gotten his cowboy-esque accent, having lived here in Sunnyvale, California his whole life. If anything, people here had the most opposite "accent" from cowboys I could think of. They drew out their vowel sounds in traditional California style, whether a surfer emphasized how "gnaaarly" something was, or a tech. company executive wanted his "cawffeee already."

I'm watching Corbin's encounter with the girl in the yellow sweater when Debbie comes over to remind me it's my turn to bowl. I give her the nachos and she takes me back to our lane by the arm. I chuck my ball into the gutter and shrug innocently back at the group as they offer unenthusiastic suggestions, trying half-heartedly to include me. I turn to see how Corbin's endeavor plays out. The girl's date and Corbin are on the floor, wrestling like mad children. I bowl my second attempt just as the bartender hurries over to break up the fight. No one in our lane even notices the scuffle, as they'd all been engaging in a dance-off to settle which of them could do a better robot.

Later that night as I'm returning my bowling shoes to the front, the girl with the yellow sweater walks by, arm-in-arm with Corbin, who sported a nosebleed and a toothy smile stretched across his face. I got into bed that night with the image of his smile burned on the inside of my eyelids.

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Stocking energy drinks at 3am feels a little too ironic to me, like dangling a sandwich just out of reach in front of a homeless man. I hate working grave shift, but that's currently all 7-11 offers. The usual suspects filter in and out over the first couple of hours – a group of stoners buying fifty-three dollars' worth of Hostess snack cakes and iced teas; "straight-from-the-bar" drunks buying cigarettes, nudie magazines, and more beer to drink on the drive home; insomniacs and just plain weirdos coming in for random odds and ends that I can't ever make sense out of, like two bags of ice, a box of cereal, motor oil, three packages of condoms, and DD

batteries. Finished with the Red Bulls and Rockstars, I break down my boxes only to hear the *ding* of the automatic doors sliding open. In walks Barry, waving a genial hand at me as he immediately gravitates toward the hot dog rollers.

I don't mind Barry, really, he just has annoying habits, like being incredibly particular about which "Big Bite" hot dog he wants. He scrutinizes them as if he's choosing an engagement ring – examining them from all sides, standing back up and thinking it over, then bending back down to re-examine them through the sneeze-guard. He'd have weighed each one in his hands if I let him. Instead, I just have to wait there with the tongs while he reflects fluorescent light at me from the balding crown of his head. He often asks my opinion on which one I think looks the biggest or the best. A couple of times he even had me put one in a bun, only to decide he actually wanted "this one, over here – on the left. No, *next* to that one. Yep – that's a winner." Who calls a 7-11 hot dog a "winner?" That and he teaches English at the high school, but still says things like "eck-specially" and "eck-spresso." Barry is a "hot dog connoisseur" if there ever was such a thing. Really, he's just the king of finicky-ness, but I almost envy his particularity. He annoys most everyone, sure, but he knows what he wants and won't be satisfied unless he carefully considers all options, even with something as insignificant as a hot dog.

If Barry is the king of finicky-ness, that surely makes me the king of indecision. Most days, my opinions change so quickly and frequently that I have trouble just picking out what clothes to wear. I don't know how to be "stylish," and the people who do bug the hell out of me. Everything changes so frequently I don't even know where to start. Mismatched socks are a big trend right now, but ironically, there are rules to that. The colors have to complement each other, somehow. How the FUCK does that work? Coordinated-mismatching? I just can't do it. So I end up pissed off or depressed and wearing whatever the last things I took out were because it's

either too hard or I just don't care anymore – usually resulting in some ungodly combination of colors or patterns eliciting stares from people wherever I go. And if I can't even choose what to wear for a single day, how can I possibly commit to a specific career where I spend multiple *thousands* of dollars and *years* of my life on something like college? Hence my job at 7-11 instead of “doing something with my life,” as I've so often been admonished by my mother. At least here I have a uniform – no clothing choices involved.

“You don't have any of the quarter-pound ones with cheese in the middle?” Barry asked, rising and taking a big, swooping yawn exactly the way I'd seen hippos do it on The Discovery Channel—like they thought their jaws could stretch wider than their heads allowed. That was another thing about Barry; he was always yawning.

“Sorry Barry, they're out in the warehouse, I guess. We should have them again on Tuesday, hopefully.”

He nods, clearly disappointed. His whole body moves when he nods, like he's some kind of weird puppet where each movement shakes other parts of his body at random. He bends back down to inspect the other hot dogs when the door *ding-s* open again and in clumps Corbin. He's wearing the same dark-lensed sunglasses he had at the bowling alley all those months ago, but his sweatshirt had been replaced by a thick, plaid, flannel shirt, the sleeves of which were shredded and doused with fresh blood from deep, erratic gashes in his forearms. Despite the urgent medical attention his arms clearly require, he cruises the aisles with the same easy stride he had at the alley. I have to assume he only has one speed – even if he were in a burning building engulfed in flames, I just can't picture him running, or even jogging, for that matter. He picks up a handful of items from around the store, holding them right on top of one of his bloodied forearms, and saunters up behind Barry, patiently waiting his turn. I stare right at him

and he just stands there facing me. I get the feeling his eyes aren't on me, but it's hard to tell with them hidden behind those sunglasses. It's like some bizarre western showdown, but instead of pistols, he has a small bundle of medical supplies and I have Slim Jims.

“Have you ever had the taquitos?” Barry asks, standing up.

I nod, still looking at Corbin.

“Are they any good?” Barry, following my gaze, turns around and sees Corbin's bleeding arms. Barry didn't hold back like I had. “Holy shit! What the hell happened to you?”

“Possum,” Corbin says, his head tilted slightly to one side.

Barry stares at him, apparently awaiting further explanation. Receiving none, however, he turns back to me, swallows, and says, “I'll have the one on the back row.”

I bun his hot dog, ring up his purchase, and he leaves without another word. Corbin sets his small bundle of items on the counter.

“What can I do for this?” he says, motioning toward the ‘medical’ supplies – a bottle of Hydrogen Peroxide, a tube of superglue, a new pair of Office-Mate scissors, a roll of blue “Shop Towels” from the automotive aisle, a roll of duct tape, and a handle jug of Jack Daniel's whiskey. He keeps his head level with mine but his eyes – which I can just make out through his sunglasses at closer proximity – remain on the counter.

“Sorry?”

“I don't got money for this stuff. You want your icebox compressor fixed?” He inclines his head toward the to-go ice cream cooler with the “out of order” sign taped to it. “I'm assuming that's the trouble – usually is, anyway.”

I just stand there, unsure what to say – he only had a few things that can't have totaled more than ten or eleven bucks, but he doesn't have enough to pay for it? And he's offering to fix the cooler with those mangled arms?

“Uh, that's all right. We've actually got a repairman coming in tomorrow. You can just have that stuff, though – you need it,” I say, looking down at the ribbons of shredded skin on his forearms. “Do you want some help?”

Corbin pauses, then states, “If you've got a mind to, all right.” I tell him to wash his arms off in the bathroom and bring out two buckets from the back room to sit on. When he comes back out, he'd ripped off his shirt sleeves. “Just pour some Peroxide on 'em, then wrap 'em tight with the tape. I'll glue the deeper ones when I get home.”

We sit on the buckets and I tear open the Shop Towels and hold a wad of them to each of his arms. They feel grooved, like I'm pressing the towels over the grated-end of a block of cheese. He never shows any sign of pain or discomfort, despite my pressing as hard as I can to staunch the bleeding and splashing generous amounts of Peroxide over them, producing a loud, prolonged *hiss* as it bubbles and froths.

Corbin's eyes remain transfixed on the far corner of the store, but I can't tear mine away from him. His lower lip sticks out like he's sucking on a mouth guard, likely – I assume – from having his jaw broken a few times in his life. His nose is a perfect, round-edged triangle, exactly like a billiards rack. His brow juts out a little too far, giving him a dramatic, caveman-esque forehead that holds his sunglasses at least an inch too-far off his eyes. It's like looking at a wooden sculpture that someone hacked out of an old stump, or maybe while riding the bus, so they couldn't hold the wood still enough to get symmetrical angles.

“I appreciate that,” he says, as I finish wrapping the tape over his arms. He stands up, still looking vaguely toward the entrance. “I don’t like debt, much, so I’ll be back in a couple of hours to fix that sign out front.” One of the bulbs on our sign above the entrance doors went out a couple days ago and the sign, itself, has a massive crack across it.

“Thanks,” I say, “but you really don’t have to. I can just put this stuff down as ‘damaged,’ or I’ll just pay for it myself. Like I said, you need it.”

“I could’ve done without until I got home but I might’ve lost too much blood on the walk – otherwise I wouldn’t have let you bother.” Walk? The “Junk House” – assuming he still lives there – is at least ten miles from here and it’s 4:27am. Granted, people refer to Sunnyvale as “Anytown, CA” because it’s so un-unique it literally *could* have been any town in California – meaning it’s unlikely for him to run into anything unusual or dangerous. Except possums, I suppose.

“You enjoy this...” he pauses, carefully choosing his next word, “occupation?” he asks, and flicks his eyes up into mine. Not dramatically, but it immediately commands my attention, as it had in the bowling alley. It feels like he can see past my pupils and is prodding my brain with his gnarled fingers.

“It’s all right,” I say. “I gotta pay the rent somehow.”

Corbin grunts. “Never had one, myself,” he says. “An ‘occupation,’ I mean.” He pauses, still looking through me. “I just do what needs doing. Sometimes for me, sometimes for other people. Like extracting a possum from my aunt’s trailer – she wasn’t about to do it, but I could, and I knew she’d pay me well for it. I got a good meal after that. I never concern myself with work or money. There’s always some kind of work to be done and money just seems to come

along when you need it. But I guess most people aren't very trusting, these days. But everything hinges on trust, see? And I don't mean trust in some 'higher power,' if that's what you're thinking. I mean trusting that just doing whatever you do will get you exactly what you need."

He stops there and his eyes go back to the entrance, like a robot that had suddenly shut off halfway through completing its function.

I mull over what he said. He has this way of putting immense ideas into short, direct lines of speech that seem simple, but are full of deeper significance. I wonder if he knows how much he's in my head. I *am* one of the 'untrusting people' he mentioned, but I can't decide if he understands that and is trying to teach me some kind of lesson or if he's just reflecting on the world around him and my being there listening hasn't factored into his thoughts at all. I want to ask him so many questions, but I don't know how or if I can. As I attempt to formulate my thoughts into words, he picks up his items and walks toward the exit.

"Wait!" I call after him, still not knowing what to say. A random, insignificant thought that had been tearing at me since I saw him in the bowling alley pops into my head. "What did you say to her?" I ask. "The girl in the yellow sweater, I mean."

The corner of his mouth turns up.

"Nothing illogical," he says, and walks out.

I get home that morning around seven and fall asleep for about ten minutes before I get a phone call. It's Stan, the morning shift attendant, who says "Some crazy-looking guy with duct tape all over his arms showed up with a ladder and took our sign off the front of the store!" When I get to work the next day, the sign had been mended almost seamlessly and the bulb behind it had been replaced. I wonder where he'd gotten the bulb.

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Standing in line at the post office is always a clash of emotions, especially today. On the one hand, I like that the employees and the customers all seem as if they're dead inside. No emotion, just the constant exchange of "mail this" and "stamp that." Even the colors around the place are lethargic and stale – pale hues of gray, white, and blue. The only thing that breaks up the deadness of the room is the occasional customer's kids tearing around the place in bright clothes and yammering nonsense to themselves. Other than that, it's sterile; the way I imagine reptiles communicate. On the other hand, it drives a stake into the nervous-ness center of my brain. I suppose that's pretty constant with everything in my life, but today, the post office is worse for some unknown reason. The emotionless faces are comforting but also unsettling. There's definitely a reason for the expression "going postal." Surrounded by impassive faces, you have to wonder how many of them have snapped or are about to snap. And then they ask if there's anything dangerous in *your* packages – "Anything liquid, fragile, flammable, explosive, or otherwise potentially hazardous?" – probably because they know what it's like to be at a mental breaking-point, and assume that half the people here have snapped as well and are attempting long-range homicide, all of which makes picking up a package, like I am today, immeasurably worse.

When I got home last night, this little Post-It-sized note was stuck in my mailbox like a death threat, reading: "Hi Jeff, your package is available for pickup." First off, how do they know my name? Secondly, who would send me a package in the first place? After a few hours of

going through the list of every person I know to see if they had any reason to want to kill me, I'm now standing here in this room full of detached nutjobs, which isn't exactly improving my imagined idea of what's in the package. It could be anthrax. Or a kitten. Or a severed limb. I'm still seven people in line from the front; my hands can't be shaking this early on. What if they think I'm nervous because I'm picking up something illegal?

Just as I turn to walk out and try again some other time, a little blonde blur runs straight into my leg, bounces off, and lands flat on his back. The kid looks up at me through eyes filling with tears in the few seconds of shocked, heaving-breaths of silence before he realizes he's hurt and starts scream-crying. I notice his shirt has a picture of a possum wearing sunglasses under the caption, "Awesome Possum," and the image of Corbin's mutilated arms reforms in my mind – his calmness while waiting in line behind Barry, seemingly bleeding to death; the control with which he walked himself over to the girl in the yellow sweater, fully expecting a fight; all of the 'advice' he'd given me, based solely on his own rationale—and I realize for the first time what impresses me about him isn't his rough look or the perilous situations he gets himself into – it's the fact that he doesn't seem to think at all. He just acts.

The screaming kid's mother shoves me out of the way and picks him up off the floor, then turns and gives me the stinkeye.

"A kid falls down right in front of you and you just stand there and stare at him?" she demands, shouldering the kid. "Asshole."

I watch her rush out through the exit. The people in line behind me throwing scowls in my direction, but I barely notice them. She'd called me an "asshole," and again, I remember Corbin. Maybe I could be an asshole, too...

I take a deep breath, letting it swell with the new resolution inside me, and walk past the line of waiting customers. My heart wallops harder in my chest with every customer I pass. The old man at the counter on the left takes his stamps from the employee behind it and starts walking out. The black woman next in line makes her way up to the counter the old man just vacated, but I get there first, swooping in just in front of her.

“You got a package for me,” I state, slapping the notice from my mailbox down on the counter like an outlaw ordering a whiskey in a saloon. The employee behind the counter looks at my notice with glazed eyes, and goes to get my package, not realizing I’d cut the line. My heart pummels the inside of my ribs like it’s Jack Torrence from *The Shining* chopping through the door with an axe.

“Ex-cayoose me?” demands the black woman behind me. I hear her hoop earrings jingle as she shakes her head with the words for emphasis.

I turn toward her, attempting to keep my face from expressing the terror and punching anxiety currently ripping apart my insides. Her face is crumpled into the deepest scowl she can muster – as are the other customers behind her. One of her hands is fisted on her hip while her other hand holds a rigid index finger in my face like a switchblade; the universal gesture for “Oh no you didn’t!” For a fraction-of-a-second, I almost scoff – what a cliché. However, her wrath is genuinely terrifying, and I’m closer to running away than I am to mocking her.

“Yes?” I say, feigning as much casual-ness as I can.

“You think you can just *skip* your way on up to the front, huh?”

My insides feel like they’re caving in, but I lock my face. My mind assaults itself with hundreds of possible replies. Everything from “fuck off” to “Oops, I didn’t see you (all) there” to

rambling apologies involving groveling for forgiveness in a crumpled heap at her feet. “What would Corbin say?” flits through my mind over and over for an eternity that exists within seconds.

“Huh?” she repeats, her eyes expressing the tiniest hint of self-doubt. I can see her questioning herself for moment, wondering if she made a mistake; if I’m not mentally-impaired in some way, rather than just a complete bastard. But I’m not handicapped, I remind myself – I’m an asshole.

“And?” I ask. I’m pretty sure that officially qualifies me as an asshole, simply judging by the look of unbridled rage on her face. I turn my back on her to seal the effect.

“Oh *hell* no! He did *not* just turn his back on me!” she exclaims behind me. I hear her bedazzled high heels *click clack* up to the counter as the employee returns with my package. She shoves me out of the way with her hips and slams one hand onto the counter with a bang. Her other hand is in the employee’s face with that same rigid finger extended.

“This...*man*, ” she pauses, looking me up and down with authentic hatred in her narrowed eyes, “just cut the *whole* damn line and doesn’t even seem to care!” The employee looks at me, a slight frown reflecting on her face, which had been expressionless up until this second. I’m sure she could care less, but I’ve created a problem that consequently involves *her* having to do something, so she’s unhappy.

“Is this true?” asks the employee, to which the customers in line respond before I even get the chance to defend myself.

“He did – I saw him!”

“He just cut the whole line while we were all standing here!”

I put my hands – which are shaking violently now – back on the counter, and attempt to shove my hips against the black woman enough to regain my position, but she’s solid as a slab of marble. Using every bit of my determination, I keep my face as blank as humanly possible, while the employee stares at me, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“That line looked too long for a single package,” I say. “Thought I’d just get in and out real quick.” The black woman just stares into the side of my face like she’s generating an incurable disease inside me. The employee sighs and sets my package aside.

“You’re going to have to go to the back of the line, Sir.”

“Why don’t you just give me my damn package and I’ll get the hell out of here?” I say, panic and adrenaline unintentionally amping up my tone. The employee looks somewhat ruffled, but seems to realize I’m dead set on getting my package, while the black woman tilts her head in disbelief at what I just said.

“You are *some* piece of work, you know that, Mr. ‘I’m-too-good-for-lines?’” she spits.

“Just sign for your package,” the employee says, sliding over a clipboard with the form. The black woman rounds on the employee.

“This son of a bitch cuts the whole line and you just *give him his package?!’*” she demands of the employee, just as the customers in line speak up again, demanding I be thrown out. I see my opportunity and take it. I crisscross an “x” on the signature line, grab my package, and make for the exit, as the customers in line shout obscenities at me. Something flies past my head – one of the black woman’s shoes. I duck and sprint out the entrance doors.

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Driving through the old neighborhood to get to the “Junk House” is like taking the scenic route through all of my childhood memories. Crittenden Middle School, alone, is enough to haunt my dreams anew for weeks. The eucalyptus trees with eternally-peeling bark still stretch high over the spot where Natalie Craig told me she would *never* go out with me because I was “too quiet” and “a weirdo.” The original playground stuff – the metal slide, cement turtle, and wooden teeter-totter that gave every rider in shorts splinters – has been replaced with brightly colored plastic obstacles. Alex Cabot, basically my only childhood friend, once told a group of kids he “wasn’t *really* friends” with me when they asked him why he hung out with “that retard” as I listened, unseen, from the tunnel of the twisty slide. Even Mrs. Robinson, my fourth-grade teacher, asking me – in front of everyone – if I could “handle” answering a question at the front of the class, like I was stupid. I did feel stupid then, but the thing is, I *still* feel stupid. I think most people grow out of that kind of self-consciousness, but I seem to have only gotten worse over time. It’s like all their comments just absorbed into me, and I didn’t even need people to tell me I was “strange” or “spacey” or “too stuck in my head” after that – although they did so even more often all throughout high school. It just became a part of my own understanding of myself.

I question why I’m even trying to find Corbin in the first place (to tell him I failed at being an asshole?) when, crossing the creek I used to catch frogs in, I notice someone lying next to the stream – someone who looks proportionately incongruous. I pull over, hop the barrier, and slide down the concrete to the rocks. The creek is lower than I remembered, but I can still smell

the moisture of the mossy rocks in the air. Corbin is laid flat out on the rocks a ways down the creek, comfortable as if he were sleeping on a King-sized mattress, his hands behind his head and an old, faded hat resting over his eyes.

The rocks clack together under my feet as I approach. Corbin lifts the bill of his cap with a finger and squints up at me.

“What brings you ‘round here, Jeff?” Corbin asks, letting the bill of his hat back down over his eyes.

I sit down next to him, unsure how to say what’s in my head. A moment passes in near-silence, but for the occasional car crossing the bridge over the creek.

“I guess I don’t get it, Corbin. I tried to follow your advice and failed miserably. I’m not an asshole. Or I can’t *be* an asshole. I can’t even just be a normal human. I don’t know *what* I am...” A second ago I hadn’t known what to say, but suddenly words flow out of me like I’ve been waiting to say them for years. “Maybe I *am* stupid. I can’t ever seem to figure anything out. I just get stuck in my head over every little thing, no matter how insignificant. And I’ve been like this since I was a kid. I can’t date, I can’t do college, I can’t even fucking dress myself without basically having a nervous breakdown! What the *hell* is wrong with me?”

Corbin lies motionless, unresponsive. Then—

“What advice?” Corbin asks.

I look at him – or rather, I look at the hat covering his face.

“All that stuff you told me about women and sex and having an ‘occupation’ when you were at 7-11 with your arms bleeding all over the place. ‘It all hinges on trust’—Remember that?” I ask, incredulous.

“I’m sure I don’t,” Corbin says. “I don’t give...*advice*.” He says “advice” like it was a dirty word. Anger that I don’t fully understand rises up inside me.

“So you just—so you’re telling me all that shit you said was what, exactly? That’s just the way you talk in everyday conversation?”

“I just speak my mind. If anyone listens, that’s their problem,” Corbin says.

“Oh, it’s *my* problem, is it?” I say, breathing hard. “You just wander in and out of my life, ‘speaking your mind,’ and I treat you like some kind of—some kind of...”

But I don’t know what I was going to say. I don’t know what I thought he was—or maybe what I *wanted* him to be. A mentor? A model of some kind? Was *that* honestly how I saw Corbin? I look over him. Dirt-crusting boots, shabby jeans, old shirt. The hat has holes in it. Lying in a creek like a homeless person. What the hell *had* I been thinking?

“You know what, Corbin? I don’t know what I thought you were, but I think I know now. You’re just a *weirdo* exactly like me. I don’t think you know much of anything! I think you just go about doing whatever floats into your head the second you think of it because you’re *just* as strange and crazy as I am.” A gust of wind blows across us like I’m causing a storm with my words. Corbin sits up, pushing his hat back on top of his head. His eyes stay on the rocks.

“Well, at least I ain’t afraid of every little thing that happens,” he says, and his eyes, pressed into a sort of glare, meet mine. I look right back into them. I’m not some child he can intimidate with eye contact anymore.

I launch myself at him, toppling us over onto the rocks. I end up on top of him and throw my fist as hard as I can into his cheek. I let up for a moment, surprised at myself. Corbin turns his face back to mine, a spot of blood in the corner of his mouth, and a trace of a smile appears on his face as he throws his own punch.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *Corbin* started with a reflection on how much I hate group dates, and kind of just spiraled from there. I wanted to write about 1) a character who overthinks every single insignificant detail of his life, and 2) a character who gets maimed by a possum – and happens to be the antithesis of character 1. I suppose it’s written for my fellow overthinkers who are kept up late into the night by thoughts of how something they said or did weeks/months/years ago was perceived by someone that has no bearing on said overthinker’s life. Literary influences include: Ron Carlson, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Nick Hornby, Aimee Bender, Pinckney Benedict, and Matthew Quick.

**BIO:** *Christopher Davis studied creative writing at Utah State University. His work has appeared in BioStories, Foliate Oak, Sink Hollow, and Z-Publishing's latest anthology of "Utah's Best Emerging Poets, 2019." He currently lives in Providence, Utah with his wife and cat - who is a complete jerk.*